



December 23, 2021

*Sent by email*

Rochelle Walensky, MD, MPH  
Director  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
1600 Clifton Road NE  
Atlanta, GA 30333

**RE: Quarantine and isolation guidance**

Dear Dr. Walensky:

On behalf of our 50,000 Flight Attendant members at 17 airlines, I am writing to weigh in on the recent request by the CEO of Delta Air Lines regarding suitable isolation time for fully vaccinated crewmembers who experience breakthrough infections. The Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO feels strongly that this type of decision should be based on science, not staffing, and they should be made by public health professionals, not airlines.

We know that some fully vaccinated people will have a breakthrough infection<sup>1</sup> and we now understand that the number of affected individuals will be higher than before because the current vaccines were not tailored to address the now-dominant Omicron strain. The vast majority of crewmembers are vaccinated at this point, but may not have received a booster. If a fully vaccinated crewmember tests positive – whether for the Omicron, Delta, or another strain - we support your agency's current recommendation to isolate for 10 days<sup>2</sup> for several reasons.

We recognize that how long a person should isolate is not a “one-size-fits-all” number of days. We also note that fully vaccinated people may be less infectious for less time than unvaccinated people.<sup>3</sup> Still, we consider your current 10-day recommendation to represent a prudent middle ground. From what we can tell, there is insufficient data to parse the difference between necessary isolation time for vaccinated people compared to those who are unvaccinated. We think that this is, in part, because the term “fully vaccinated” represents a spectrum of protection depending on the type of vaccine, the time elapsed since the last dose, whether a booster injection was given, age, and immune status. The necessary number of isolation days is also complicated by the fact that people are being infected by different strains of COVID-19 which are not equally virulent.

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<sup>1</sup> Bergwerk, M; Gonen, T; Lustig, Y; et al. (2021) “Covid-19 breakthrough infections in vaccinated health care workers,” N Engl J Med. 2021 Oct 14; 385(16): 1474-1484. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa2109072>.

<sup>2</sup> CDC bulletin: “Quarantine and Isolation,” Available online: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/quarantine-isolation.html>; last updated December 9, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> CDC (2021) “Ending isolation and precautions for people with COVID-19: Interim guidance,” Available online: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/duration-isolation.html>; last updated September 14, 2021.

The current climate in the passenger cabin is highly stressed. We are experiencing a record high number of aggressive passenger incidents, many of which are fueled by alcohol and refusal to comply with onboard mask rules. Staffing flights with crewmembers who may still be symptomatic, infectious, or both by shortening them on necessary isolation time will only make this situation worse. Flight Attendants should not be expected to return to work until they **test negative and do not exhibit symptoms**. We do not know if 10 days represents that “magic number,” but we do not see the justification for reducing the number of days at this time.

In closing, we note that your guidance is not specific to Flight Attendants; it also applies to passenger service agents, pilots, and other travel industry workers with whom we come into contact. Under your leadership, we need the CDC to err on the side of caution by ensuring a suitable number of isolation days so that people who remain either infectious, symptomatic, or both are not circulating and infecting others. This is particularly important for crewmembers and other transportation sector workers to maintain services in a way that protects public health and works towards ending this pandemic.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sara Nelson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Sara" being more prominent than the last name "Nelson".

Sara Nelson  
International President